



Driving Our Lives Away

LET'S FACE IT, WE LOVE TO DRIVE. WE DRIVE FOR WORK AND WE DRIVE for pleasure. We drive with a purpose and we drive for the heck of it. But we drive. And we put our lives at risk every time we do.

Road safety can generally be considered from two broad aspects: the driver and the road environment. Serious safety challenges on both sides contribute to the unfortunate fact that, for most of us, driving is the most dangerous thing we do—particularly in the context of our work in the forest industry.

RCMP, ICBC, WorkSafeBC and coroner's statistics clearly show that in 86% of crashes in BC, the driver is at fault. WorkSafeBC calls it "human factors," RCMP calls it "human error," ICBC calls it "blame," and the coroner calls it "deceased." No matter what you call it, the fact is that we make mistakes while we drive. These mistakes include errors in judgement, mistakes due to distraction or impairment of some kind, or through risk-taking behaviour.

We are all familiar with campaigns against drunk driving and distracted driving. But what about other things? We do everything in our vehicles but drive, it seems. Drivers have been shaving, reading the newspaper and painting their toenails (true story!). We make notes, some drivers actually work on their laptops, we play with the GPS, we're on the two-way radio or the phone, we eat, we drink... the list goes on. All these activities take our hands off the wheel and our minds off the task.

On a broader level, we're also facing the issues of an aging population, whose reaction times are slower and who have medical issues while driving. Fatigued driving is another huge issue, whether the drivers are older or have been working long hours. The number of log truck drivers who had heart attacks this past winter would surprise and scare you. There is a direct correlation between how good you feel and how well you drive. There is a reason the average life expectancy of a truck driver in Canada is 14 years less than the average Canadian male.

As drivers, we need to take our responsibilities behind the wheel a lot more seriously. Most people believe they are good drivers; but we need to challenge ourselves with honest self-assessment. What do you do when you're behind the wheel? Are you fully engaged in the task of driving and the moment-by-moment multi-tasking and decision making safe driving demands? Or do you look at driving as the means

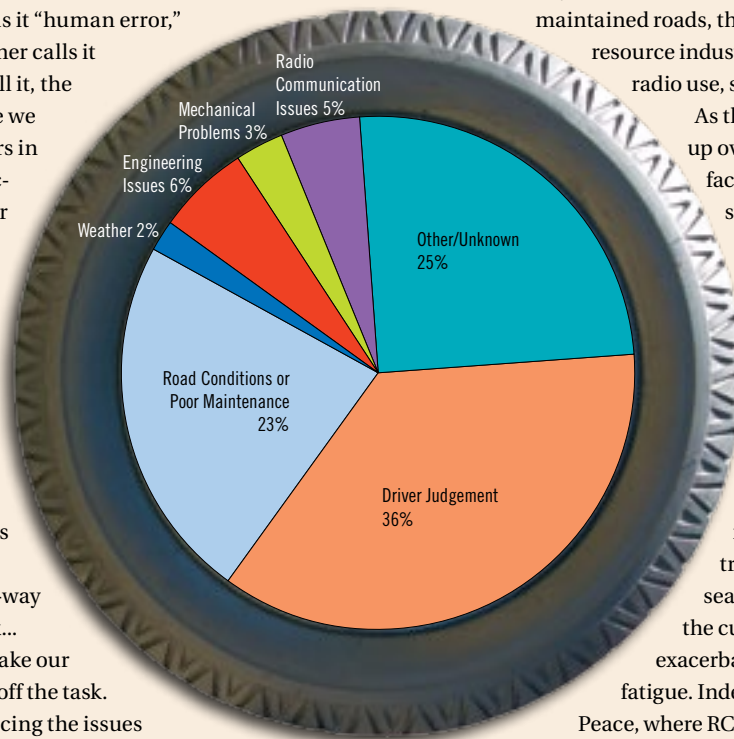
to an end and find yourself drifting across the centre-line, onto the shoulder, because your mind or hands were engaged elsewhere?

The roads we drive on are another story. We have an ageing and sometimes inadequate infrastructure. Often we're driving on roads not designed for the types of vehicles or the volumes of traffic we experience today. British Columbia has approximately 47,000 km of public roadway, and upwards of 400,000 km of resource roads of varying size and condition. Working in the forest industry, most of us will experience a mix of highway and resource road driving over the course of a day, and face the challenges of single lane marginally maintained roads, the interface of the public with natural resource industry traffic, and inconsistencies in radio use, signage and "rules of the road."

As the natural resource industries ramp up over the coming years, additional risk factors will be introduced to our road system. The worker shortage will see an increase in foreign workers, for whom English, spoken and written, is a challenge. On a radio-assisted road system, this will bring increased risk. A new generation of workers, most of whom are unfamiliar with "bush driving," will enter the natural resource extraction industries and be driving resource roads without adequate training. The economic imperative of seasonal production schedules cultivates the culture of "hurry up" and "get 'er done," exacerbating risk factors such as speed and fatigue. Indeed, this is already the case in the Peace, where RCMP statistics confirm that the three greatest contributing factors in crashes in the region are "booze, belts (lack of seatbelt use), and speed."

While we may not all drive for a living, most of us drive to help us make our living, whether getting to and from work or driving as part of our job duties. The risk is no less real when you're driving your kids to soccer or going to get groceries than it is hauling logs or laying out blocks. We need to take driving seriously and taking simple steps to keep ourselves and those with whom we share the road safe. Keeping ourselves healthy, focusing our minds on the road and our driving when we're behind the wheel, and driving according to conditions will help. As our RoadHealth slogan says, "It's in YOUR hands." 🐾

MaryAnne Arcand is executive director of the Central Interior Logging Association and co-ordinator of the RoadHealth Coalition. Her passion for road safety stems from losing her younger sister in a crash.



This chart shows the cause of the 212 crashes of forestry-related vehicles in 2005.